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Start school early and we can help poor kids

By **ANDY FLECKENSTEIN**

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In Milwaukee, one out of three school-aged children lives in poverty. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Milwaukee ranks sixth highest in the nation. Many of these children do not have access to quality education at an early age, which gives them a disadvantage when entering school. It also affects their academic achievement, odds of graduating and potential for earning a family-sustaining wage as adults.

In other words, early childhood literacy is crucial to breaking the cycle of poverty.

Research shows that successful programs don't teach just children. Academic performance improves when parents are involved. This might seem obvious, or even easy. But, for the single mother of three working two jobs, it's anything but easy. It's much harder to help with homework when you're focused on getting food on the table.

For the past four years, the Fleck Foundation has supported United Way's early childhood education initiative because the programs it funds require parents to be involved. We know that this key component leads to success. As a result, each year we challenge the community to support the initiative by matching donations dollar-for-dollar that are designated to address early childhood literacy. Our hope is to stimulate growth in donations and increase attention to this important issue.

One program in particular, Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters or HIPPY, conducted by COA Youth and Family Centers, sends "coaches" to the homes of low-income families. The coaches show parents how to teach their children through reading.

The results speak for themselves.

Children participating in the COA program are more likely to enter first grade with critical reading skills. In fact, 86% of children in COA's program enter first grade at or above the proficient reading level. In another program at the United Community Center serving Latino students, many of whom speak Spanish as a first language, the English reading proficiency levels of its participants double in less than two years.

Here in Milwaukee, we're faced with mediocre graduation rates, plummeting test scores and a widening racial achievement gap. To quote the late philanthropist Marty Stein, "Time is not on our side." But focusing on negative results or pointing fingers won't solve the problem. We all have an obligation to become a part of the solution - not just the schools, not just families with children, but

you and me.

I am asking you to join me in addressing this critical issue. Whether you donate time or money or urge your friends and colleagues to join you by stepping up to support early childhood literacy, you can make a difference. Education leads to employment, which leads to a family-sustaining income, which promotes family and community stability. In other words, we all win when a child succeeds in school.

I believe societies can be judged by how they treat their children. When generations to come look back, how will we be judged? Will we settle for the status quo or break through the educational barrier? What do we want our legacy to be?

This is our test. Will we pass or fail?

Andy Fleckenstein is trustee of the Fleck Foundation, formed in 1996 as a result of the sale of Fleck Controls. The foundation helps people recovering from drug and alcohol use and supports improving educational outcomes in Milwaukee by partnering with about 80 organizations. Learn more about United Way's campaign at www.liveunitedmilwaukee.org

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